

RCCS

Annual Review

RCCS Annual Review

A selection from the Portuguese journal *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*

#0 | 2009

Issue no. 0

“Defeat happens only to those who stop fighting”: Protest and the Democratic State in Portugal

José Manuel Mendes



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/rccsar/108>

DOI: 10.4000/rccsar.108

ISSN: 1647-3175

Publisher

Centro de Estudos Sociais da Universidade de Coimbra

ELECTRONIC REFERENCE

José Manuel Mendes, « **“Defeat happens only to those who stop fighting”:
Protest and the Democratic State in Portugal** », *RCCS Annual Review* [Online], #0 | 2009, Online since
01 September 2009, connection on 21 April 2019. URL : [http://journals.openedition.org/
rccsar/108](http://journals.openedition.org/rccsar/108) ; DOI : 10.4000/rccsar.108

José Manuel de Oliveira Mendes

School of Economics and Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal

“Defeat happens only to those who stop fighting”: Protest and the Democratic State in Portugal*

In this article, the author seeks to understand how citizenship is constructed by examining the case of a local space strongly marked by collective mobilisation. The case study is used to understand how the dynamics of the local community intersect with the logics of control and power of the central state. He argues that the concepts of populism, bossism, caesarism, and so on, reshaped by both media and political elites according to the requirements of the democratic game, point to irrational behaviours and disqualify the capacity for political subjectivation of persons and populations, suppressing the socio-political processes that may explain certain actions and representations in the field of politics.

Keywords: Citizenship; collective action; protest; local movements; central state; representative democracy; participatory democracy.

1. Introduction

In her book about the production of political apathy in everyday life, Nina Eliasoph (1998) found that political ideas circulated in just the opposite way from what was postulated by scholars writing about the public sphere. In other words, it was only backstage that it was possible to hear conversations about national politics, justice or public goods. Eliasoph called this tendency the cycle of political evaporation (1998: 255). In the cycle of political evaporation, the more public the context of conversations, the more people express opinions and grievances pertaining only to their small world or to their communities. As politics and political life are unavoidable for all of us as citizens, Nina Eliasoph concludes that political apathy requires a specific production logic and derives always from personal and collective activities such as, for example, the definition of very specific contexts where dissent and critique are possible. Her argument is that, in the name of a mythical community, people avoid public expressions of opinion against the general consensus.

Contrary to Nina Eliasoph's findings, I will argue that in Portuguese society political life and political activities exacerbate passions and produce complex public spheres where contradictory voices, discourses and identities intersect. Instead of an evaporation cycle we have political effervescence cycles that structure social relations, frame friendships, mould

* Adapted from article published in *RCCS* 72 (October 2005).

family networks and profoundly shape people's daily lives. Thus, in this article I seek to understand how citizenship is built by looking at of a locality strongly marked by collective mobilisation. This case study allows us to analyse the dynamics of intersection of the local community with the control and power logics of the Portuguese central state.

Two episodes will be used to illustrate the struggle of a local movement to gain the status of municipality for Canas de Senhorim, a struggle that has been going on since the Revolution of 1974.¹ The first episode has to do with the voting of a bill in Parliament that would grant the locality such status, and its subsequent veto by the President of the Republic. I will show how the political elites and the media commentators tried to normalise, politically and discursively, local demands and struggles.² This was achieved by using technical and administrative arguments and by applying a rational logic to territorial planning. In addition, local actions were devalued and labelled as extremist and irrational. Such labelling is generally used to justify the rightfulness of elite views and to exclude common citizens from the public sphere.

The other episode is related to the shipping of some tons of depleted uranium that were deposited in the locality, extracted from the mines in the region in the 1980s. This episode allows us to see how the Portuguese State, based on the rule of law, employs sheer force and the judicial apparatus to control and repress local initiatives.

Drawing on direct observation and informal conversations with participants of the local movement, I seek to show how the political is produced in everyday life, how the local inhabitants mobilise politically and how they interpret State practices. I also seek to analyse the complex production of personal and collective identities.

¹ For a detailed description of the socio-economic characteristics of Canas de Senhorim, located in the Central Region of Portugal, the inception of the local movement and the main events related to its struggle from 1974 to 2000, see Mendes (2005). My sources for the present article are news published in national and local papers on these two episodes, official documents (proceedings of parliamentary debates and committees) and leaflets and flyers of the *Movimento de Restauração do Concelho de Canas de Senhorim* [Movement for the Restoration of the Municipality of Canas de Senhorim].

² We must keep in mind that elites constitute a plural and heterogeneous reality, and that there are competitive processes between different elites (political, economic, cultural, etc.) and various degrees of autonomy as well as different forms of recruitment. For a recent re-evaluation of the concept of elite, see Heinich (2004). For the Portuguese case, see Pinto and Freire (2003).

2. Protest actions, localism and political participation

To analyse the spatial anchoring of the local movement and to discuss the question of localism I draw on John Agnew's study on the role of localism in Italian politics (2002), rather than on the classical contributions from community studies.³ Agnew proposes a multiscale concept of place that provides a better understanding of the spatial dimension of political processes (2002: 216-220). People produce the places they live in through active socialisation, by constructing identities and mobilising social and political interests. The networks in which people are embedded always have a territorial grounding. Place, for Agnew, should be seen as topological space crossed by different scales and crystallising different historical contingencies. It follows that political action can only emerge from within concrete life contexts, delimited by very specific historical and geographical markers. To conceptualise the role of places in the production of political practices and representations is to take into account the emergence of a multiplicity of identities that coexist in a contradictory way and that take root in and project themselves onto territories with variable configurations.⁴

The theoretical challenge is to understand the regime of collective action that structures and frames these territorial configurations. Since local or personal ties constitute the basis of what Laurent Thévenot (1999) called proximity regimes or proximate politics, they deserve closer attention. However, the workings and the constraints of these proximity regimes are not well known given social scientists' general condemnation, from a civic standpoint, of personal ties of dependence, which are usually labelled as nepotism, favouritism, caciquism, caesarism and paternalism. The analysis of proximity regimes should focus on their ability and potential to develop and to rise to the general category of the political with civic relevance. Collective and public involvement implies the transformation of personal and localised concerns, deceptions, and problems into public issues.⁵

In conceptualising the relationship between democracy and protest actions, it is important to distinguish, as proposed by Jacques Rancière, the notion of politics from that of

³ For a review of community studies, see Liepins (2000); for a comprehensive critique of community theories, see Estanque (2000: 40-67); for an anthropological analysis of the territorial anchoring of identities in Portugal, see Silvano (1997).

⁴ For a discussion of the complexity of identity issues, see Mendes (2001).

⁵ In an article on globalisation and social movements, François Dubet shows the increasing importance of self politics, recognition and private life in the political arena (2004: 703).

police order. Police order, for Rancière, is an organisation of spaces with no void and no supplement: society is made up of rigid and clear functions, places and ways of being that constitute all that it is possible to imagine.⁶

The essence of politics, on the other hand, for Rancière, is *dissensus*, the manifestation of a rupture in the way of being in the world. Political demonstrations are always sporadic and their subjects always precarious. Politics resides in the dissenting modes of subjectivation that express the difference between society and its members. Politics is not defined by any entity that precedes it. It is, on the contrary, the political relation that makes the political subject thinkable. Politics consists in transforming the space of circulation defined by the police into a space of demonstration for a political subject. Taking equality as the only political universal, Rancière argues that real participation is the invention of the unpredictable subject that occupies the street, of the movement that arises from nothing but democracy itself. Taking to the streets and demonstrating are indicators of community and agency.

In a similar argument, Andrew Barry, in his study of protest movements against the construction of new roads in the United Kingdom, suggests that the analysis of those protests as political events should pay close attention to the protest actions themselves, rather than postulate underlying political identities, ideologies or social movements (2001: 175-196). Barry establishes an interesting analogy between scientific demonstrations and political demonstrations, since as much work is needed to turn something into an object of scientific knowledge in a laboratory as it is to turn an object into a political object and to create specific sites where political action can take place. For this author, an action is political to the extent that it opens up new sites for, and creates new objects of, contestation.⁷

Protest actions and processes can only be fully understood if we take into account what Roger Dupuy (2002: 183-193) calls people's politics, that is, the way established powers and agents construct and discursively frame popular actions and the persons who carry them out

⁶ In her brilliant book about May 68 and its political consequences in France, Kristin Ross (2004) argues, closely following Jacques Rancière, that much of the sociological production about the events of 1968 in France tends to share police language and discourse, obliterating the singularity of experiences and the subjective sense that people attribute to this singularity (2005: 30-31).

⁷ Barry points to the relevance of an ethnography of the political that is attentive to the specificity of political events (2001: 177).

(2002: 183-193). From a historical and anthropological perspective, Dupuy shows how protest actions tend to be included in the descriptive – rather than analytical – concept of populism. In order to theoretically recover this concept, he proposes a distinction between spontaneous populism (democratic or of social protest – *demos-plebs*) and instrumentalised populism (involving invariably identity protest – *demos-ethnos*). However, this merely typological distinction is not helpful for a critical analysis of the concept or the ideological work that it performs.

This task was undertaken by Annie Collovald, who presented a brilliant deconstruction of populism in works published in 2004 and 2005. She shows that the movements which called themselves populist started out on the left of the political spectrum, and that in the second half of the 20th century there was a conservative ideological revolution, originating from specific local debates in the United States, which would become widespread among intellectuals, social scientists, journalists and political analysts. In these debates, the term populism became connoted with authoritarianism, which depoliticises the notion of the people, reinforces the role of charismatic leaders, and categorises popular mobilisations as irrational (2005: 225). This conservative reconceptualisation, she argues, legitimises elite domination and disqualifies popular protests and demands and the very notion of the people, the essential foundation of democratisation processes.

Methodologically, as my main concern in this article is with power relations and the role of the State, I follow Michel Foucault when he proposes that the analysis of micro powers or of “governmentality” procedures is not a question of scale but of point of view, and that the analyst must adopt a deciphering method (2004: 192). Instead of relying on universals like sovereignty, the people, subjects, the State or civil society, and deduce concrete phenomena from them, one should begin with concrete practices and test the universals against these practices (2004: 4-5). For Foucault this has to do with understanding power in its extremities, in its finest filaments, where it becomes capillary and overrides the rules that organise it and define its limits, materialising in local and regional forms and institutions (1997: 21-28). This analytical proposal doesn’t postulate the diffuse presence of power in every context, but calls attention to subjectivation and subjection processes, in which the production of subjects and collectives is embedded in relations of domination.

Taking these theoretical frameworks as a guide, I now turn to the analysis of the social dynamics of mobilisation of a local social movement that confronted directly the policies and agents of the Portuguese State.

3. A local social movement

3.1. The bill on the reinstatement of the Canas municipality and the President's veto: Citizenship and the elites

After having boycotting all the elections in Canas de Senhorim since 1999, and following official appeals from national authorities, namely by the President of the Republic and different political party leaders, the Movement for the Restoration of the Municipality of Canas de Senhorim decided to ask the population to vote in the parliamentary elections of March 2002.⁸ The national representatives of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) agreed to present a bill on the reinstatement of Canas as a municipality if “the legal order was re-established” in the parish. In the weekly meetings of the Movement, its leader began to convey the message that they had to choose the institutional route. This strategy was publicly presented on 3 March 2002 at a meeting that included PSD district leaders. At the beginning of the session, the leader of the Movement, Luís Pinheiro, reported that several parties had agreed to support their demands, namely PSD, CDS-PP (Social Democratic Centre-Popular Party), BE (Left-Wing Bloc) and PCP (Communist Party). He also told the audience that the President had made an appeal for the re-establishment of order, and had suggested that the approaching political period might be favourable to their demands.

Many were reluctant to accept this change of strategy and insisted on radicalising their struggle until Canas was reinstated as a municipality, but the leader of the movement argued that voting was also a weapon of struggle. He went on to say that the boycott continued in Canas, since there was no electoral campaigning or political propaganda in the

⁸ Canas de Senhorim was a municipality until 1852, when it was abolished and annexed by the municipality of Nelas. The Movement for the Restoration of the Municipality of Canas de Senhorim was created soon after the 1974 Revolution, and achieved a significant victory when the town got a separate postal code after several days of confrontation with the police in August of 1982. In 1997, Luís Pinheiro, a secondary-school teacher who had the support of the Social Democratic Party, became the leader of the Movement. From then on, it would conduct its struggle on the national level, negotiating with central political authorities. On the history of protests in this town, as well as on the political and social dynamics associated with the Movement, see Mendes (2005).

parish, which was interdicted to politicians unless they were expressly invited.⁹ According to Luís Pinheiro, voting was a way of responding to the appeals of district and national political authorities and could be strategically used in the struggle of the Movement. Following this argument for institutional normalisation, he also emphasised the need to re-establish the legal functioning of the parish council.¹⁰ Strategically, he argued that the Movement was a popular expression that was distinct from the parish council, given that the latter had a legal status and institutional legitimacy. However, the council and the people should act together as a form of pressure on the government.

The results of the national elections of March 2002, with the victory of the Social Democratic Party and the prospect of a government coalition with the Popular Party, were favourable to the political aspirations of the movement.¹¹ On May 31, PSD would indeed present a bill in Parliament to grant Canas the status of municipality (Bill no. 44/IX).¹²

The institutionalisation strategy of the movement would be strengthened with the constitution of a single list for the local elections that took place in July 28 of the same year. The institutionalisation of the local struggle led the Movement to normalise its political activity, thus suspending all street actions and demonstrations.

One year later, on 12 June 2003, PSD presented a proposal to change the national law that defined the general conditions for the creation of municipalities (Bill no. 310/IX/1).¹³ This bill provided for exceptional cases, which required a general consensus and a qualified majority in Parliament or a favourable vote on the part of the local authorities involved. In its first formulation, due to the opposition of the Socialist Party (PS) to the specific case of

⁹ In addition to PSD, the Popular Party and the Communist Party would also hold meetings in the parish.

¹⁰ The local parish council had been operating as an administrative committee since its dissolution in January 1999.

¹¹ The movement's leader was officially affiliated with PSD.

¹² On 11 June 2002, the Left-Wing Bloc (BE) also presented a bill to the same effect.

¹³ This law (no. 87/1989, of September 9) established the geographical, demographic, infrastructural, electoral and institutional conditions to create municipalities. In a small country like Portugal, few localities meet the established criteria, and given the long tradition of centralisation, the creation of municipalities is a controversial issue. Since 1974, only four new municipalities have been created: Amadora, Odivelas, Trofa and Vizela. The first two are large peripheral localities of the metropolitan area of Lisbon and their creation was consensual. But the other two only became municipalities after fierce political debates and violent protests, especially in Vizela.

Canas de Senhorim, only the possibility of creating a new municipality in Fátima was politically consensual.¹⁴

Political dispute within and between parties about amendments to the national law was fierce from the beginning. As the report of the parliamentary committee on Local Government, Territorial Planning and Environment shows, PS and PCP voted favourably a resolution that stated that the PSD bill was unconstitutional. However, and almost paradoxically, PS would also vote with the governmental parties (PSD and CDS-PP) in favour of the discussion of the same bill in the parliamentary plenary session.

On the first day of the plenary debate, on 12 June 2003, PSD would present a version of the proposed amendments to the national law that was different from the one that had been discussed and voted in the parliamentary committee. This new version eliminated the rule of qualified majority voting.¹⁵ The parliamentary debate was marked by procedural questions and reservations about this new revised version, and all the opposition parties were against it. Even inside the Cabinet of Prime-Minister Durão Barroso, and within his own political party, PSD, there were divisions on this issue. Journalist Helena Pereira, of the national newspaper *Público*, in an article significantly entitled “Canas de Senhorim embarrasses the government,” reported that although it had been an electoral promise, the granting of the status of municipality to Canas had the opposition of the PSD standing committee and of many of the Cabinet ministers (June 21, 2003).¹⁶

The conference of parliamentary party leaders scheduled the discussion and voting of the cases of Fátima and Canas de Senhorim for July 1. Since the amendments to the general law on the establishment of municipalities had not yet been approved, both cases had to be

¹⁴ The national newspapers conveyed the idea that Fátima was consensual among all parties in Parliament, as it was an internationally famous Catholic shrine and counted on the political leverage of the Catholic Church. The Socialist Party and the President also favoured the establishment of Canas as a municipality (*Jornal de Notícias*, 2 July 2003). But according to the new bill, the localities of Esmoriz (proposed by PS), Tocha (proposed by CDS-PP) and Canas de Senhorim (proposed by PSD and BE) did not fulfil the requirements to become municipalities. The prospects of change in the national law led the Communist Party to propose another locality for municipality, Samora Correia, and PS and PSD followed suit with proposals to the same effect.

¹⁵ This was due to backstage political negotiations between the Canas Movement and Ministers of the Cabinet, including the Prime Minister, Durão Barroso. The first formulation of the revised law, requiring a qualified parliamentary majority, due to the opposition of PS, made the creation of the municipality of Canas de Senhorim impossible. Only on the eve of the last plenary session on the creation of new municipalities, 30 June 2003, would this change be approved in the parliamentary committee, with the favourable votes of PSD and CDS-PP, and the opposing votes of PS and PCP.

¹⁶ Confirming internal party divisions on this issue and backstage negotiations and pressures, PCP would also propose a bill to establish Canas de Senhorim as a municipality on the eve of the last plenary session.

considered on the basis of the existing law, whose requirements were not met by the two towns.¹⁷ The proposal of Fátima was voted favourably by all parties and Canas de Senhorim had the opposing votes of PS.¹⁸

Contrary to all expectations, and in contrast to Fátima, only some of the leaders and supporters of the Canas Movement went to Parliament to attend the debate. Given the Movement's previous history of powerful public actions, this was a form of absence, of maintaining a low profile, of playing the democratic game.¹⁹ The people from Canas who witnessed the final voting in Parliament showed visibly restrained joy, thus respecting the rules of the institution. They recalled their long struggle and the hunger strike in 1999 in front of the Parliament building.²⁰ Theirs were personal memories of anti-establishment actions, of desacralisation and of victory over the established political powers. With a sense of relief and satisfaction, now that they had achieved their goal, they swore repeatedly that they would "never again" suffer or make personal sacrifices.²¹

In Canas de Senhorim the celebrations lasted for a week. On the day following the parliamentary vote, a local cultural association bought food and beverages that were freely given to all those who came to the town centre. The local choral group sang in all the cafés and bars, suspending momentarily the social and political differences that structure the everyday leisure spaces. In one of the days local women organised the festivities, followed on the next day by the men. The women's initiative was a challenge to male dominance and symbolised their autonomous capacity for action, which had been apparent in the role they had played in the local political struggle. Women thus affirmed their importance to the

¹⁷ The fact that the final vote on the amendments to the general law would take place only two days later, on July 3, clearly shows the inconsistency of the whole process involving these two bills.

¹⁸ Opinions were not unanimous among the socialist representatives, and since party discipline on voting was exerted, many of them made personal floor statements, including the socialist parliamentary leader (*Público*, 2 July 2003, article by Nuno Sá Lourenço, "New municipalities reduced to Fátima and Canas de Senhorim").

¹⁹ In 1998, when Odivelas, Vizela and Trofa became municipalities, many people from Canas de Senhorim demonstrated their disagreement in the galleries of Parliament and were removed by the police. In 2003, this low profile strategy was so entrenched, and consciously assumed, that the bill on the establishment of Canas de Senhorim as a municipality was not even included on the parliamentary agenda.

²⁰ In the collective memory of all the protest actions undertaken by the Movement, hunger strikes stand as the most difficult, the most painful and the less effective, being perceived as offensive to personal dignity and humiliating as citizenship acts. Hunger strikes would be completely ruled out of the Movement's repertoire of protest actions.

²¹ This feeling of superiority in the confrontation with the established powers (which I witnessed from the time I began fieldwork, in 2000) would be seriously shaken in the events related to the shipment of depleted uranium in 2004, which I will describe in the next section of this article.

struggle, but also demanded that their social and political visibility and presence in the public sphere be maintained.

A communitarian and non-commodified logic prevailed during the festivities. It was a ludic and liminal way of reworking identities, of affirming community and equality. Old rivalries and enmities were momentarily forgotten, and even those who had been critical of the Movement or of its goals were accepted into the common fold. The celebrations affirmed the population's self-respect, the recognition of their existence and their worth, and the possibility of development for future generations. All media publicity, both positive and negative, about the Movement's struggle over the years had projected the locality onto the national political space, and offered to its inhabitants a basis to transcend their daily lives, a central feature in all personal and collective work of construction of identities.

This idea of a mythic community, ritualised in annual commemorations on August 2, with free distribution of food and beverages, is the main factor that explains the tenacity of the people and the long duration of their struggle.

In the meantime, in the national media, analysts and political commentators were unanimous in denouncing the parliamentary process that had ended with the creation of the two new municipalities. They criticised Parliament for yielding to populist pressures, arguing that this would legitimise extreme or illegal acts in Portugal. They explicitly asked for a presidential veto, although at first there were no indications that this would happen. According to an article by journalist Alexandra Marques (*Jornal de Notícias*, 3 July 2003), sources from the President's Office had suggested that the law might be sent to the Constitutional Court for review and returned to Parliament with a message from the President.

The opinions of political analysts and commentators reveal a narrow view of the democratic state, founded on rationality, deliberation and elitization of the political system. Citizenship is reduced to acceptance of parliamentary decisions and of the logic of the political and party microcosm.²² Analysts criticised the casuistic manner in which municipalities had been created, accused representatives of being uncritical and of pandering to popular wishes with an eye to future elections, and denounced the

²² For the concept of political microcosm, defined by violence and closely connected to Manichean notions of life and death, see Abélès (2005).

collaboration of left-wing parties in the voting in Parliament. The socialist Augusto Santos Silva, in his weekly column in the newspaper *Público* (July 5, 2003), argued that the case of Canas de Senhorim had shown the success of what he ironically called a “gauche” version of politics. According to him, whenever groups are involved in struggles they should always get the support of the extreme left. The creation of municipalities thus overrides technical and administrative rationality, and depends only on the social capital of those who demand it. According to Santos Silva, the voting in Parliament conveyed the idea that “Rational, here and now, is to fill a square, to tear up railroad tracks, to cut off a road.”²³

The commentaries of analysts, based on legalistic and technocratic arguments, reinforce the legitimacy of the political rules of the party-political and parliamentary microcosm, and disqualify local struggles and social and political conflicts that arise in the public sphere. Politics is reduced to an inter- and intra-institutional game and to the rational application of the rules devised by the elites. But aren't protests a sign that the political system actually works, as well as an indicator of the maturity of a democracy, as Jack Goldstone states (2004)?

All the press articles that I analysed conveyed a decontextualized view of local demands, merely reproducing images and features derived from media reconstructions of the events. They thus actively contributed towards producing and perpetuating the negative representation of protest actions. Labelling protests as populist or unrealistic, as Annie Collovald (2005) argues, implies normalising and negatively including the dynamics of participatory citizenship in the public space (Collovald, 2005).

On 31 July 2003, the President vetoed the new law on the creation of municipalities.²⁴ In his message to Parliament he stressed the danger of multiplying new demands with no rationality or logic, and emphasised the need of merging municipalities into more cohesive and viable administrative units. He also recommended that a white paper on municipalities be prepared, with clear guidelines for territorial planning in the country.²⁵ On the same day, the speaker of

²³ Similar arguments can be seen in the columns of Henrique Monteiro, a well-known journalist, published in the national weekly *Expresso* (July 5, 2003), and Vital Moreira, a Professor of Constitutional Law at the University of Coimbra, in *Público* (July 8, 2003).

²⁴ The veto was on the law approved on July 3, which defined the new criteria for the creation of municipalities, and not on the bills approved on July 1, pertaining to the specific cases of Fátima and Canas de Senhorim. In juridical terms, these bills had no legal basis after the presidential veto.

²⁵ The fact that this recommendation was never taken up shows that political institutions and parties were unwilling to discuss such controversial issues.

PSD declared that his party accepted the decision of the President, thus announcing the end of a political process that have been so divisive for the national political elites.

The news was received in Canas de Senhorim with no public signs of protest. The leader of the Movement, in the weekly meetings with the members, showed some hope of a negotiated solution for the presidential veto. After unsuccessful meetings with some political parties and with the President's advisors, the local struggle and the political protests would resume officially on 20 January 2004.

In a symbolic gesture, the room for the weekly meetings was transferred from the first floor to the ground floor of the parish council building. This room was decorated with the colours of the Movement, and behind the main table stood the flags of Portugal, of the Movement and of the European Union, reinforcing the institutional nature of the new space. Symbolic solemnity and the rituals that go with it were to be maintained. The walls were lined with pictures of many of the protest actions of the Movement and poems on the bravery and resistance of the people. Turning to the persons gathered there, the leader declared: "It's the room of the struggle."

This official and symbolic resumption of the struggle was publicly confirmed on January 25 at a rally in Canas, where the leader made the most radical of his speeches to date, electing as privileged targets of his attack the journalists and the media. This speech would alienate journalists from the movement, and would prove very costly in political terms. Although at this time a possible institutional arrangement to solve the situation had not yet been discarded, the demand for full citizenship would soon rely once again on election boycotts. On 13 June 2004, Canas boycotted the European elections. On October 5 of the same year, the day of the official inauguration of the Museum of the Presidency of the Republic, the leader of the Movement and a group of followers²⁶ chained themselves to the main gate of the Belém Palace in Lisbon, a protest action that had extensive national media coverage. It was clear that their political target was now the President. On November 6, hundreds of Canas' inhabitants deposited uranium-mining tailings in the public gardens in front of the presidential palace. This protest action sought to alert public opinion to the

²⁶ This group consisted of about twenty persons, evenly distributed by gender and ranging in age from 20 to 80 years old.

environmental degradation caused by the presence of thousands of tons of uranium tailings left behind after the closing of the mines in Canas in the 1980s.

The dissolution of Parliament by the President of the Republic in December 2004 made all the bills of the legislature void, and the cases of Canas and Fátima would not be taken up again by Parliament.

3.2. The depleted uranium shipments: An affair of State and the affirmation of a local struggle

On 10 October 2004, the electronic edition of the newspaper *Diário Económico* reported that the National Institute of Engineering, Technology and Innovation [Instituto Nacional de Engenharia, Tecnologia e Inovação], which held 337 tons of depleted uranium deposited in Canas de Senhorim, would sell 127 of those tons to Germany.

This coincided with a turbulent phase of the protest actions of the Movement after the presidential veto. It was the first time, since the beginning of the new phase of the struggle in 1998, that there was an opportunity to launch an initiative of resistance directly against the central State. The uncertainty resided in how the central State would react to local actions. Although the same political coalition governed the country (PSD and CDS-PP), there was now a new Prime Minister and a new Cabinet, and the Movement had only had informal contacts with the new government.

The radicals, including many of the women who participated in the weekly meetings, rejected any kind of compromise, and demanded that the question of the establishment of Canas as a municipality be discussed directly with the government and the President. On 15 November 2004, there was a rumour that the uranium shipment had been scheduled for the next day, and that two trucks were already inside the premises of the *Empresa Nacional de Urânio* [Uranium National Company]. As it happens, the Movement's leader had negotiated with the national authorities that the shipment would meet no opposition from the population. However, many of the Movement's supporters did not receive this news well, and denounced what they saw as a compromise in a process that should be consistent with the final goal of their struggle.

On November 16, hundreds of persons gathered outside the company building to prevent the uranium shipment. Confronting a significant police apparatus, demonstrators chanted slogans in favour of the establishment of Canas as a municipality. After a whole morning of negotiations, the Minister of the Environment, Nobre Guedes, agreed to meet with the

Movement's leader in Lisbon. At the end of the afternoon, local representatives of the Movement received the news that an agreement had been reached and that the trucks could leave. Reluctantly, with many angry shouts and jeers against politicians and the President of the Republic, protestors demobilised, and slowly the trucks rolled out to their destination.²⁷

In statements to the press, after the meeting with the Minister of the Environment, the Movement's leader stressed the Minister's promise to initiate the environmental requalification of the area and to attend to the labour problems of the miners. According to him, the solution for the issue of the establishment of the municipality rested entirely with the President, given that he had vetoed the bill.

In Canas, the people who had been involved in the protest against the uranium shipment read the episode in a very different manner. As the trucks departed, they had expressed strong emotions of anger, indignation and sadness. For many of them, the political weight of the Minister of the Environment was minimal and the environmental requalification of the area a secondary issue. Some told me that it seemed that with the trucks went also a part of their struggle, that this episode raised questions about a collective memory that had been built over the years on confrontations with local and national authorities. In the words of a woman, "We will now have no coin for exchange. Do we want the municipality or requalification? What we did there [in front of the company building] was good for nothing."

This partial defeat was symbolically heightened by the fact that it had happened in their own space. As one of the protesters said, "And then going down there [to Lisbon]. He [the Movement's leader] should never have gone. The meeting should have been here. We protested on April 25 [of 1999], did a lot of things in other places, and here in our town they accept this?" This downgrading of the local space opened up a symbolic breach in the Movement's collective memory, which was almost impossible to mend. In addition, the political affiliation of the Movement's leader with PSD, one of the political parties in power, was seen by many as an obstacle to the radicalisation of the local struggle.

²⁷ The national press presented different interpretations of this episode. In the newspaper *Jornal de Notícias* (November 16, 2004), the headline "Protests can't prevent the shipment of 30 tons of uranium" suggested the powerlessness of the population. In contradistinction, the headline of the newspaper *Público* was "Population of Canas de Senhorim blocked the shipment of uranium at ENU" (November 16, 2004).

Because of these positions, the leader was compelled to carry out the rhetorical and practical work of symbolic reconstruction of the struggle, and this involved carefully separating the positions and actions of the government from those of the President. In the weekly meeting that preceded the second uranium shipment, faced with the radicalism of many of the participants, he called for dignified restraint and passive resistance based on non-violent actions.

On the date of the second shipment, 23 November 2004, the police apparatus in Canas was impressive.²⁸ The sale of depleted uranium by a Portuguese scientific institution assumed the status of an affair of State, and it was viewed as a test to the ability of the State to apply sovereign power and enforce the rule of law (Foucault, 1997). This aspect of the issue was reinforced by the presence of a great number of local and national journalists from the press, the radio and the national TV networks. From early morning dozens of persons concentrated near the uranium company premises. Throughout the morning the Movement's leader talked to the demonstrators through an improvised sound system, and called for dignified, non-violent resistance, saying that he was waiting for an answer from the President.²⁹

Around 12:15 the police opened the gates so that the trucks could leave. As people said, this time was strategically chosen by the police commander, since, given the traditional gender division of labour, women had returned home to prepare lunch for their families. As a form of resistance, the demonstrators sat down on the road. The police commander, enforcing the law and reinforcing the repressive role of the State, warned them that road blocks were a crime according to the Portuguese Criminal Code, and read aloud the relevant section of the law.³⁰ Afterwards, riot police began removing demonstrators from the road. It was a pure confrontation of bodies, as the police did not use any of its special equipment. There were two types of confrontation: one of bodies disciplined and trained to enforce authority against male demonstrators accustomed to hard work, in a pure logic of masculinity and virility; the other, of policemen against women, many of them quite old,

²⁸ In addition to hundreds of regular officers of the National Republican Guard, there were in the field K9 teams, mounted police and dozens of officers of the anti-riot Operational Battalion.

²⁹ The radicalism of some of the demonstrators was apparent in one of the banners, which read "Sampaio=Salazar," thus comparing the current President with the fascist dictator Salazar.

³⁰ In Portugal, the criminalisation of road blocks was only introduced in the Criminal Code of 1995, partly as a consequence of the blocking of the 25th of April Bridge in Lisbon in 1994.

which emphasised the grotesque nature of the event and led to outbursts of emotion and violence.

After these confrontations, the police managed to elude demonstrators and to drive the trucks safely out of town. Enraged, dozens of demonstrators drove to the nearby railway and cut off all circulation. A regional train was stopped at the station, and throughout the afternoon there were violent clashes between the demonstrators and the police, who tried unsuccessfully to make the train advance. At dusk, police forces abandoned the site, and the demonstrators saw this as a victory over not only the police forces but also the State and political power. At an evening rally, which was broadcast live by some national TV channels, the Movement's leader blamed the President for the events of the day and appealed to the President's own experience as an anti-fascist student during the 1960s in Lisbon, thus making a deliberate analogy between the events in Canas and the fascist regime.

These events had extensive media coverage, and throughout the day there were many live TV reports from Canas. On the following day, national newspapers carried front-page headlines about the events, and all the articles conveyed a negative image of the demonstrators' actions and arguments. In *Público*, the front-page headline read, "GNR [National Republican Guard] forced to intervene against demonstration in Canas de Senhorim" (24 November 2004). In the inside pages, the title was "Canas de Senhorim demonstrators involved in confrontations with GNR." Alongside the detailed description of the events, there was an inserted commentary by another journalist that recalled the Movement's leader inflamed speech against journalists which had occurred in January 2004.³¹

Jornal de Notícias chose to present the official declaration of one of the President's advisors on its front page: "Canas' protests 'defy democracy'." The title in the inside pages carried a very different message: "Canas gives Sampaio a week" (November 24, 2004). The journalist presented an extensive description and contextualisation of the events, emphasising in the end the statements of the President's advisor: "The positions assumed by

³¹ The same journalist, Nuno Amaral, would sign an opinion article with Nuno Sousa, another journalist from *Público*, classifying the actions of the movement as blackmail on the President and urging him to publicly acknowledge the impossibility of Canas ever becoming an autonomous municipality (27 November).

the Movement defy democracy and are contrary to the rule of law. What happened today in Canas de Senhorim is nothing more than a police case.”³²

In a clear way, the President’s advisor activated the distinction proposed by Jacques Rancière between politics and police order. By turning local events into a police case, he re-established order and social hierarchies and silenced the local population’s protests and demands. As representative of a supreme political institution, he took the initiative of defining what is or is not political, and of denying legitimacy to the persons that protested on the street. In other words, his declarations emptied out the core of democracy: the construction of a dissensual public sphere open to dialogue

Another shipment was scheduled for 14 December 2004. But this time there was an important institutional change. Parliament had been dissolved by the President and a transitional government was in place. The Movement’s leader, who was also the president of the parish council, called a general council meeting for the same day, to take place outside the uranium company premises. This was a way of asserting democratic legitimacy and mobilising local authorities, as well as a pretext to delay the uranium shipment. During the meeting, the Movement’s leader read aloud the complete official report on the environmental requalification of the area.

As the day went by, the unrest and lack of coordination of the police forces were becoming visible. The goal of the police commander was to make the trucks leave before the hundreds of local men that worked outside Canas returned home. As the trucks started moving at 4:30 p.m., violent confrontations ensued between hundreds of demonstrators and the riot police. A woman was arrested and a few demonstrators were wounded. These events would be broadcast live by all national TV channels.

Taking the same critical stance as before, the national press emphasised the agonistic relationship between the authorities and the local population, viewing it as a simulacrum of a fight with several rounds. All the news reports celebrated the re-establishment of order and normalcy, and thus participated in the ideological work of devaluing the protest actions, which were labelled as idealistic.

³² In the same article, the Minister of Internal Affairs stated that “The obstruction of a railway or of any kind of public space is a type of behaviour that demands decisive intervention because it constitutes in itself an illicit act of a criminal nature.”

As a consequence of these events, and following a request by the Attorney General, the police identified thirty people involved in the protests and summoned them to appear in court. In his statement to the national newspaper *Público* (22 January 2005), the Movement's leader declared that this was the kind of "outright intimidation typical of the fascist period," since the police had identified "entire families, namely those that were more active [in the struggle]." He also appealed to all local inhabitants to voluntarily present themselves at the local police station and declare that they had participated in the protest against the uranium shipment. According to Movement sources, around four hundred persons answered to this appeal. In front of the police station some of them displayed sheets of paper with the statement "Defeat happens only to those who stop fighting."

The Movement hired a famous lawyer from Coimbra to defend the prosecuted inhabitants of Canas. In declarations to the newspaper *Jornal de Notícias* (February 11, 2005), on the occasion of the first court session, this lawyer minced no words and stated the following:

This is a matter to be resolved politically by the competent political powers. It is not a relevant criminal situation, which justifies the intervention of the courts. [...] To bring these matters to the courts is to instrumentalise them, to put them possibly at the service of political interests, with the goal of intimidating and dissuading people from getting on with the struggle for what they find just and necessary for their hometown. [...] This should be solved by Parliament, by the President of the Republic and the Government, and not by this dramatic metamorphosis that turns honest and hard-working people into criminals [...]. This is the kind of behaviour that is typical of dictatorial regimes.

In one of the weekly meetings of the Movement, it was established that all the legal fees, including the lawyer's, would be paid with money raised among the population of Canas, as way of showing the community's solidarity with the persons that had been indicted.

4. Conclusion

The process of democratic normalisation in Portugal has been grounded in a parliamentary consolidation of the rule of law, in an inexorable process of re-elitization of political life through representative democracy. The rhetoric of an European and modern Portugal participates in the constant work of construction of a selective collective memory and of wilful forgetting of a recent revolutionary past, slowly and systematically eroding the ideals of equality and popular participation.

The professionalization and the specialisation of political life reinforce the internal and self-centred dynamics of the political arena. This closed circle, this microcosm, legitimises itself through the technical-bureaucratic rationality of a project of modernisation whose centre is the production of a legal and political system that affirms order and the established hierarchies. This functioning of the political sphere projects itself onto, and is reproduced in, the media, where journalists, newspaper editors, columnists and political analysts, many of whom are parliamentary representatives, produce disqualifying discourses on popular protest actions in Portugal. Labels like populism, caciquism, caesarism, and so on, reshaped according to the requirements of the democratic game, imply irrational behaviours and underestimate the capacity for political subjectivation of common citizens, suppressing the concrete socio-political processes that explain certain actions or representations in the field of politics.

This point of view allows us to understand why political authorities and agents in Portugal have such extreme reactions when confronted with election boycotts, for instance. These boycotts bring common citizens into the political space and the public sphere, and allow them to affirm their citizenship and their right to participate in the political – often outside party politics – by using their voices and their bodies to disturb the myth of a conflict-free democracy. By suspending the principles of representative democracy, election boycotts compel us to reflect on the concept of citizenship and the rights and obligations that it entails. The disruption of the normal democratic game clearly points to the fictionality of the idea of a government of the people, by the people and for the people. Boycotts are extreme political acts that create opportunities for the critical construction of political subjects and for an analysis of the basic principles of democratic regimes.

The two episodes that I described in this article allow us to understand how Portuguese elites construct and legitimise, through a legalistic and technocratic vision, the powers that be. In this case study, the political and media elites were faced with a local popular movement with a long tradition of struggle and a repertoire of innovative and disruptive actions that targeted the national political institutions. The endurance of the local movement is explained by a proximity regime with civic relevance, based on a non-commodified social interaction that builds a mythic community of equals. This idea of equality is reinforced in the daily activities of the Movement, since the local elites do not participate in them. The strong politicisation and radicalisation of the Movement's members

contrast with the institutional vision of the leader, who favours political negotiation, compromise and the purely political game.

The voting and vetoing of the bill that would establish Canas as a municipality were a direct consequence of the specific rules of the parliamentary game, of the tense relationship between the political institutions involved, and of the interests of political parties. As such, they show the reproduction logic of the political and institutional spheres in Portugal, and the way in which local demands can be used to perpetuate the established hierarchies and the *status quo*. The delicate political balance that is in place is not conducive to raising questions about the notion that local populations are too naive and irrational to decide about their own destinies, to participate in territorial planning options. The planning of the national territory belongs to specialists, and the rule of law in a democratic state ensures that the appropriate legal and technical mechanisms are fully applied.

The events connected to the shipping of depleted uranium show how the Portuguese State effectively uses its sovereign power. By enforcing the law and using physical violence, a simple financial operation was turned into an affair of State. The size of the police apparatus that was mobilised and the judicial indictment of many of the local inhabitants reveal the ways in which the State seeks to normalise the functioning of democratic institutions by removing from the public space the voices and bodies that engage in protest. As Jacques Rancière aptly noted, police action seeks to effect an adequate distribution of places and functions and to construct that which legitimises this hierarchical distribution.

The two episodes can be seen in light of this concept of the police. The national elites defined the political agenda and the relevant themes to be discussed, treating common citizens as mere consumers of policies, political discourses and measures. This was done by the combined action of three components: the law, which criminalises an ever greater number of actions in public space, defines strict territorial planning rules, and so on; the national media, which defines what is newsworthy and what should be made visible in the public sphere; and, finally, the security forces, which stand as the bedrock of the power of the State.

Revised by Teresa Tavares

References

- Abélès, Marc (2005), *La défaite en politique*. Paris: Circe.
- Agnew, John (2002), *Place and Politics in Modern Italy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Barry, Andrew (2001), *Political Machines. Governing a Technological Society*. London and New York: The Athlone Press.
- Cefaï, Daniel; Trom, Danny (2001) (eds.), *Les formes de l'action collective. Mobilisations dans les arènes publiques*. Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales.
- Collovald, Annie (2004), *Le "Populisme du FN": un dangereux contresens*. Bellecombe-en-Bauges: Éditions du Croquant.
- Collovald, Annie (2005), "Populisme: la cause perdue du peuple," in Frédérique Matonti (ed.), *La démobilisation politique*. Paris: La Dispute, 203-228.
- Dubet, François (2004), "Between a Defence of Society and a Politics of the Subject: The Specificity of Today's Social Movements," *Current Sociology*, 52(4), 693-716.
- Dupuy, Roger (2002), *La politique du peuple. Racines, permanences et ambiguïtés du populisme*. Paris: Albin Michel.
- Eliasoph, Nina (1998), *Avoiding Politics. How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Estanque, Elísio (2000), *Entre a Fábrica e a Comunidade: subjectividades e práticas de classe no operariado do calçado*. Porto: Afrontamento.
- Foucault, Michel (2004), *Naissance de la biopolitique. Cours au Collège de France, 1978-1979*. Paris: Seuil/Gallimard.
- Foucault, Michel (1997), "Il faut défendre la société," *Cours au Collège de France, 1976*. Paris: Seuil/Gallimard.
- Foucault, Michel (1994), "Le sujet et le pouvoir," *Dits et écrits IV. 1980-1988*. Paris: Gallimard, 222-243.
- Goldstone, Jack (2004), "More Social Movements or Fewer? Beyond Political Opportunity Structures to Relational Fields," *Theory and Society*, 33, 333-365.
- Heinich, Nathalie (2004), "Retour sur la notion d'élite", *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, CXVII, 313-326.
- Liepins, R. (2000), "New Energies for an Old Idea: Reworking Approaches to 'Community' in Contemporary Rural Studies – New Directions in Community Studies," *Journal of Rural Studies*, 16(1), 23-35.
- Mendes, José Manuel (2001), "O desafio das identidades," in Boaventura de Sousa Santos (ed.), *Globalização, fatalidade ou utopia?* Porto: Edições Afrontamento, 489-523.
- Mendes, José Manuel (2005), "A Beira Town in Protest: Memory, Populism and Democracy," *South European Society and Politics*, 9(2), 98-131.
- Pinto, António Costa; Freire, André (eds.) (2003), *Elites, sociedade e mudança*. Oeiras: Celta Editora.
- Rancière, Jacques (2004), *Aux bords du politique*. Paris: Gallimard.

Ross, Kristin (2004), *May '68 and its Afterlives*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Silvano, Filomena (1997), *Territórios da identidade*. Lisboa: Celta Editora.

Thévenot, Laurent (1999), "Faire entendre une voix. Régimes d'engagement dans les mouvements sociaux," *Mouvements*, 3, 73-82.